

Facilitation: What It Is And When to Use It

- When your community or organization holds meetings, do you often fail to reach decisions?
 - Are meeting participants unclear about their roles and responsibilities?
 - Is there confusion about objectives and expectations for meetings?
 - Do your meetings display communication problems, negative attitudes and apathy?
- If so, you may want to consider facilitation to make your meetings more productive

What Is It?

According to the Webster Dictionary, facilitate means "to make easier". A facilitator is a person who can make your meetings flow more smoothly and be more productive. The facilitator paces the group, offers a variety of possible ways to approach problems, and waits until an agreement on a particular process is made. In other words, "the facilitator oils the tracks for groups to work effectively in meetings" (Doyle and Straus p. 37).

Why Use Facilitation?

- To keep meetings focused on the subject of discussion
- To have a neutral person present who will manage the process
- To accomplish goals in a more timely manner
- To give the group a sense of accomplishment

The Role of the Facilitator

The facilitator manages the process of a meeting by stepping into different roles as necessary:

- **The Opener:** Opens communication channels and initiates discussion, or facilitates better communication if the group is already talking.
- **The Legitimizer:** Reminds all parties to recognize the right of others to express opinions and be involved in decisions.
- **The Process Facilitator:** Lays down ground rules for the meeting and often formally leads the discussion, especially in the early sessions.
- **The Trainer:** Educates participants who may lack skills or preparation in the processes of negotiation and problem solving.
- **The Resource Expander:** Provides procedural assistance to the groups and links them to outside resources that may lead to more informed or varied viewpoints.
- **The Problem Explorer:** Examines a variety of viewpoints and helps the group achieve consensus.
- **The Agent of Reality:** Uses critical as well as creative thinking to question and challenge group members who have extreme and unrealistic goals.
- **The Leader:** Mobilizes the group's resources to achieve goals.

In short, a facilitator is an expert, not in providing answers, but in managing the dynamics of the group that is doing the work.

Responsibilities of an Effective Facilitator

Facilitators often encounter situations that may interfere with the meeting process. These situations include, among other things, a lack of focus in meetings, getting stuck on an issue, lack of participation, repetition, and people interrupting the meetings. An effective facilitator should have the ability and the personality to deal with these types of problems. The facilitator is responsible for ensuring participation, handling silences, helping the group maintain focus, knowing when to move or to slow down, avoiding repetition, and dealing with problem people.

The Facilitator

While we are able to define the roles and responsibilities of a facilitator, the fact is that there is no "right" way to facilitate. Much of the style of a facilitator depends on the personality of the individual and the situation and the nature of the group. Since the role of facilitator is based on flexibility and accommodation to the needs of the group members, there is no real step by step procedure to follow. The facilitator has to employ a combination of techniques to address the needs of a particular group (Doyle and Straus, p. 89).

Keep Diversity in Mind

A facilitator should acknowledge diversity in the community. In most communities, there are ethnic, cultural, and social differences that may interfere in the meeting process. Therefore, the facilitator is responsible for meeting everyone's needs. For example, if a community is bilingual, it is better to have a bilingual facilitator or to obtain a translator so that the full participation of all meeting participants is ensured.

How to Choose a Facilitator

Numerous consulting firms and individuals can be hired to facilitate meetings. For a list of these companies in your area, search the Internet or consult the telephone directory. In some instances these firms have workshops on facilitation or are able to provide useful material on the subject. Public agencies such as the Extension Service or regional councils and non-profit

organizations may also have access to people with facilitation skills.

Groups that cannot afford to hire a professional facilitator may choose to train some or all of their members in facilitation techniques. Group members can learn facilitation skills either through reading and researching the subject or by attending a facilitation workshop. It is also common for a group's leader to serve as a facilitator. He or she is then responsible for assuring the participation of all members. However, the group leader should "step out" of the facilitation role if he or she wishes to express a personal opinion or make a policy recommendation.

Additional Resources

- *How to Make Meetings Work!* by Michael Doyle and David Straus (New York: Berkley Books, 1993).
- Interaction Association, Inc., 600 Townsend St. Suite 550, San Francisco, CA 94103 (415) 241-8000.

Additional copies are available from the Office of Community Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Room 701, 300 7th Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20024 (1-800-645-4712). Copies may also be obtained at

<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/ocd>